CHAPTER I

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE INQUIRY

Introduction

Plexus started its activities in 1982, in the Chelsea neighbourhood of Manhattan. Since its beginning, it was conceived as an interdisciplinary and multicultural project committed to the achievement of a heightened understanding of alternatives to enhance human experience.

Over these years, Plexus aim was achieved through the organization and documentation of large international collaborative events, *Plexus art co-operas*, placing art in an expanded community and heterogeneous multicultural environments. Without grants or market support and auto-financed, in these events Plexus encouraged face to face dialogues and promoted creative critical interaction among all participants, involving on some occasions hundreds of artists and scientists from different parts of the world.

Plexus Black Box was conceived in 1989 for the historical survival of Plexus. The idea was metaphorically to "freeze" Plexus and its activities within a "black box" to be preserved for art history.

It was a conscious act of artists running ahead of time toward their own future.

> Being futural gives time, cultivates the present and allows the past to be repeated in how it is lived. With regard to time, this means that *the fundamental phenomenon of time is the future.* In order to see this without selling it as an interesting paradox, each specific Dasein must maintain itself in its running ahead. In so doing it becomes manifest that the original way of dealing with time is not a measuring.[1]

By "freezing" intentionally Plexus within a conceptual black box, Plexus players projected themselves into the future in defending the group's survival.

Materially, *Plexus Black Box* consisted of records and relics from Plexus history and events. Many records were compiled images made as frames of reference or quotes of other records, which Plexus have accumulated over the years. Through documentation, Plexus concepts, people and events, were linked together. Each Plexus event took place in its own present, but it was made up of past concepts and activities while it projected its own various parts into the future activities of Plexus.

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[1] Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, p. 14E, 1992.

The nature of Plexus *Black Box* was like a chain, with its concepts connected together and its events built one upon the other, that ultimately represented one persistent survival purpose: the linkage of art to the community and to the notion of well-being.

In 1990, *Plexus Black Box* was identified by Sandro Dernini as the subject of his dissertation to complete a Ph.D. in art education at the New York University.

The Need for the Inquiry

Plexus generated since 1982 numerous art events which were a significant but as yet an unexamined part of the contemporary history of art and there was no a comprehensive account of it. More than 500 artists from all over the world participated in Plexus events, and scholarly there was not yet examination of these art activities.

The main characteristic of Plexus was like an accumulation of ideas on a theme created by artists about subjects of interest to them, with materials of all kinds claimed appropriate for them and where the ordinary standards of modernism or any other *"ism,"* claimed significant by the established art world, were not taken into consideration. As a result, in Plexus there was a crossing of traditional boundaries of criticism and existing art definitions, labels and art categories. Plexus works of arts were exhibited outside the frames and realms of museums, galleries and other conventional and commercial institutions. They were addressed more to create participation in terms of life and social issues than to address *"art for the sake of art."*

In the '60s and in the '70s artists chose to break art making conventions. In the '80s, Plexus artists also turned their backs on established art expression, their art was not only no-traditional, but also no-saleable. Intentionally, Plexus rejected the Artworld system with its art definitions and declined to label its activities under any art categories. Many Plexus events took place in communities or at historic sites where social crimes had been perpetuated. There, records and relics of Plexus were packaged as works of art, in the form of multi-media installations and postmodern ritual art performances.

In 1988, Plexus proposed the opening of an Art World Bank in the island of Goree, Dakar, next to the historical House of the Slaves, as an international community-based artists effort, that in 1991 was acknowledged by Moustapha Ka, minister of culture of Senegal, in a letter to Sandro Dernini, fully reported in Appendix B.

> I would like to express to you my satisfaction for the positive project that you have taken in direction to the dialogue of cultures and in a better understanding among all people of the world.

House of the Slaves

Gorèe Island, Dakar, Senegal

The Plexus proposal stressed the need of the artists to fight against their slavery from the art market through the development of a new redefined participatory world of art.

> I believe what we will see in the new few years is a new paradigm based on the notion of participation, in which art will begin to redefine itself in terms of social relatedness and ecological healing, so that artists will gravitate toward different activities, attitudes and roles than those that operated under the aesthetics of modernism.[2]

Plexus Black Box was an example of an art form addressed to reinforce the individual while collaborating in group events. In Plexus, artists were able to preserve *in the first person* their sense of individuality even as being members of a collaborative effort. Through an understanding of the Plexus concept of *the artist in the first person*, this study might respond to the emerging interest on the issue of cultural identity and multiculturalism.

Creating alternative channels of communication among different cultural groups, connecting centers and margins, and bridging in several occasion the academy and the community, Plexus provided a ground for individuals of different fields and cultures to make original contributions in the development of an international identification having its beginning in a community-based art project. Contributions by artists coming from a vast mix of cultures, many of them at the *margins* of the Artworld were of a very disparate nature, and Plexus with its underlying open structure tried to accommodate them all.

Plexus Black Box evolved in many places, but grew mainly in the art communities of New York, Rome, Dakar, Cagliari (Sardinia), and Amsterdam. In each location, Plexus activities developed according to the specific characteristics of the environment and the

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[2] Suzi Gablick , *The Reenchantment of Art*, p. 27, 1991.

cultural aspects of that particular community and dealing with the challenging multicultural issue of crossing cultural borders and bridging centers and margins.

> Most of us cross cultural borders every day, usually unconsciously. Assuming a dynamic rather than a passive role for the arts in society, one of my goals is to raise these daily encounters – at least in the realm of language and imagery – to a conscious level….as I began to live outside New York, outside urban centers for more than half of each year, and began to experience firsthand the relationship of the provincial New York artworld to the so-called "regions." The subject of the relationship between perceived center and margins in the United States is both unavoidable and curiously unapproachable, veiled as it is by the rhetoric of democracy and liberal "multiculturalism."[3]

In Plexus activities, as a consequence of its multicultural approach, new forms, languages and ideas arose from the interaction between Plexus art process and surrounding environment.

> The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defence but also by conquest. At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way.[4]

Plexus art co-operas were made by artists and scientists interacting together and with the environment that had in common the need to research new forms of expression, moving through boundaries and limits of closed fields and disciplines, for a better understanding on human environment.

> The long-standing division between science and art is one of attitude. We learn to identify with one more than the other, know more about one than the other. The knowledge, associations, and comfort we find with what is familiar tends to make us uncomfortable, alienated, and often distrustful of the other. Both science and art are attempts to understand humanity and environment, and both give us valuable, useful information. In art education they have to be used together.[5]

In different parts of the world, Plexus events brought scientists, artists, community activists and audience together in one place, as multicultural participants, crossing separations, categorizations, and classifications. The cross-disciplinary nature of Plexus was directed against specialization and fragmentation. Understanding the project under study might prove also to be invaluable in the creation of new multicultural environments for learning in art education.

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[3] Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, p. 6-7, 1990.

[4] John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 13, 1980.

[5] June King McFee and Rogena M. Degge, *Art, Culture, and Environment: A Catalyst for Teaching*, p. 322, 1977.

Because of the *specialisation* and fragmentation in our society, it is important that we integrate all aspects of education in order to strengthen the underlying unifying elements and ensure communication. No discipline can any longer afford to be insular; although this does not imply that its special quality will be sacrificed and lost in a vague amalgam of learning. Gradually--one hopes not too gradually--concepts new and unfamiliar to many educators--informality, new roles for teachers, shared power with children and the community, the necessity for creative expression--will be absorbed into our institutions and lead public education out of its present impasse.[6]

Plexus Black Box originated as a survival need. It raised from free critical dialogues among Plexus players about the participation of Plexus in the 1992 Christopher Columbus Consortium toward the development of a cultural navigation event on the challenging issue of *"reconciliation, art and well-being in the XXI Century."*

Could we bring biologist and humanists together in one place for the enhancement each could have upon the other and thereby further guide the course of human history? How long could we keep the epistemology of science and the epistemology of human experience apart without jeopardising our future through failing to realise the importance of science and art have for each other?[7]

From the early '60s through the late '80s, artists as well as scientists challenged significantly their perspectives about the nature and purpose of their artistic or scientific methods. This study might serve to elucidate and to bring a better understanding of the artistic processes which in the mid '80s and mid '90s have characterized *Plexus Black Box*, and to which extent Plexus artistic process could be considered as an art form. The structure and concepts of *Plexus Black Box* were conceived as an emerging form of art expression, more democratic and appropriate for a multicultural art world, where voices not usually heard, at the margins of the Western modern aesthetic theories, had an opportunity to speak. It was an international collaborative survival effort made by artists raising attention, as a humankind critical issue, on the interdependences of art, well being, community and contemporary forms of slavery.

In times where individual and cultural identification are a paramount concern to all ethnic groups and with small countries emerging after years of suppression to grasp the possibilities in global participation, this multicultural interpretative study is of particular significance. In a multicultural environment, where different values and cultures are under the risk to clash, the study of the multicultural aesthetic aspects of *Plexus Black Box*, as an international community-based effort, might prove to be invaluable for understanding how members of different cultures may communicate in spite of their different languages, and their cultural/political separations.

There is a great need to understand the characteristics of an art project of this kind, made as an open art form that relates specifically to the needs of our times.

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[6] Angiola Churchill , *Art for Preadolescents,* p. 407, 1970.

[7] Jonas Salk, "The Next Evolutionary Step in the Ascent of Man in the Cosmos", *Leonardo 18,* p. 238, 1985.

Statement of the Problem

Because Sandro Dernini was part of the Plexus founding group, and was still an active participant, one may ask how can an "insider" conduct an objective inquiry? One should quickly note that the most secure scientific knowledge is nevertheless grounded in intersubjective beliefs supported by publicly accessible evidences. Thus, the supposed problem of methodology was resolved by having "insider" accounts of events intersubjectively validated as constituent of the ongoing art project under study. Dernini, as an "insider" of the project under study, applied the model of "the artist as researcher" outlined by David W. Ecker.[8] Given the large number of participants, records and relics of the project under study, dispersed in many places without any inventory, the first step was to identify the primary sources.

One main source was people and Dernini conducted a hermeneutical multicultural investigation on the primary sources of the study as "insider" views, to investigate how in a critical aesthetic discourse they were related within the *Plexus Black Box*.

It was only recently that "insider" accounts, through the controversial debate between "emics and etics"[9], have begun to gain the recognition of the scientific community. The "emic" approach applied by Dernini was consistent with the model of "the artist as researcher" as well as with the community-based identity of the project under study. It provided a unique "insider" understanding of *Plexus Black Box*, supplied by members of that community in which the project was placed as a community-based collaborative art effort. Furthermore, to reinforce the objectivity of the study, an "etic" method was employed by Dernini through a series of phenomenological hermeneutical procedures of interpretation, starting from his "stock of knowledge at hand" as pointed out by Alfred Shutz .[10]

Then, he applied the "bifurcated writing" format utilized by the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida[11] to offer at the "outsider" interpreter the reading of "insider" understandings together with the researcher's own interpretation, placed at their margins, with no predominance of a single central point of interpretation.

After, he wrote "in the first person" his overall "emic" narrative of the history of *Plexus Black Box* to provide a reflexive historical account of the project under study.

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[8]David W. Ecker, "The Artist as Researcher: The Role of the Artist in Advancing Living Traditions in Art", 1990.

[9]Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, Marvin Harris, Eds., *Emics and Etics. The Insider/Outsider Debate*, 1990.

[10]Alfred Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, p. 66, 1970.

[11]Jacques Derrida, *Positions,* p. 42, 1981.

At the end, a multicultural aesthetic interpretation of *Plexus Black Box* was derived by Dernini from his "close reading" of all "insider" narratives, reported in Chapters III, IV and V, and in Appendix A. His interpretation was not made as a conclusion, but as an open contribution to a critical aesthetic discourse, within and outside the postmodern debate, moving from a misunderstanding of the interwoven aesthetics of *Plexus Black Box* to its understanding as an open art form related to the complexity of contemporary art.

Delimitations

Because the project under study was an ongoing activity, the inquiry was delimited up to the Plexus event A *Contract to be Negotiated, Columbus Egg: The Living Plexus Black Box of "The Voyage of the Elisabeth,"* held on November 12 of 1993, at the Rosenberg Gallery of New York University. There, through the packaging of artifacts from previous events, Plexus was symbolically sealed in two containers, collectively named *Plexus Black Box*.

Due to the large number of Plexus participants living in different parts of the world, Sandro Dernini limited his field research on the collection and interpretation of recollections only of those which were identified from records and relics of *Plexus Black Box* sealed at the Rosenberg Gallery, and artists who participated in more than one Plexus event. In this study, no attempt was made to present a formal analysis of Plexus art works.

Definitions

Actual interest: is a form of relevance; the determination by the subject of the conditions under which the task of translating the unfamiliar into familiar terms is to be considered as solved; it depends on the circumstances and the situation within which the problems have arisen, and also upon the system of problems to which the specific one pertains.[12]

Aesthetics: is a field of study which is understood to include all studies of the arts and related types of experience from philosophic, scientific, or other theoretical standpoints, including those of psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural history, art criticism, and education. "The arts" include the visual arts, literature, music, and theater arts.[13]

Art: is a projection of the participant's own culture-bound aesthetic experience.

Community: is a social context defined by its participants.

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[12]Alfred Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, p. 28, 1970.

[13]From the definition of the term "aesthetics" published in all issues of the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism.

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Community-Based Art Education: is a participatory effort to build a community which is infused with the arts.   The essential difference between Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) and Community-Based Art Education (CBAE) is that DBAE operates from "top down," presumably people in higher education know enough to set the categories, the methods, the subjects-matters, the contents and the objectives for all modes of education. This puts art education in the hands of the professors.

CBAE presumably operates from "bottom up," the meaning of bottom does not refer to lower but it means more basic, in the sense of community, which would of course include art professors as members of the community.[14]

Emic: is an "insider" account, description, or analysis expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied.[15]

Etic: is an "outsider" account, description, or analysis expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers.[16]

Familiarity: is something inherent to the already experienced things we speak of as familiar to us; the habit of the subject in recognizing, identifying, and choosing actual experiences under the types at hand in his actual stock of knowledge.[17]

Interpretative relevance: is a form of relevance, in virtue of which something is constituted as familiar by coherent types of previous experiences with which it might be compared.[18]

Living Traditions in Art: is a domain of aesthetic inquiry whose subject matter is located by its participants in terms of its qualities of significance to them.[19] For the purpose of this investigation only a nominal definition is appropriate given the diversity and complexity of artistic activities of all the cultures involved.

Multicultural Art Education: is a participation in the artistic activity of another culture for the purpose of understanding it on its own terms.[20]

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[14] David W. Ecker, notes, Summer Institute on the Living Traditions in Art, New York University, November 15, 1993.

[15] James Lett, "Emics and Etics: Notes on the Epistemology of Anthropology" in *Emics and Etics. The Insider/!Outsider Debate,* Eds.Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, Marvin Harris, p. 130, 1990.

[16] Ibid., p. 130-131.

[17] Alfred Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, p. 25, 1970.

[18] Ibid., p. 36.

[19] David W. Ecker, notes, Summer Institute on the Living Traditions in Art, New York University, November 15, 1993.

[20] David W. Ecker, " Cultural Identity, Artistic Empowerment, and the Future of Art in the Schools," *Design for Arts in Education, p. 15*, 1990.

Reflexivity: is a capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself: subject and object fuse.[21]

Stock of knowledge at hand: is the sedimentation of various previous activities of our mind, and these are guided by systems of prevailing actually operative relevances of different kinds.[22]

Method

Sandro Dernini employed the model of "the artist as researcher," outlined by David Ecker in "The Artist as Researcher: The Role of the Artist in Advancing Living Traditions in Art."[23]

The first sequences of procedural steps outlined by this model were: reading the primary sources in the literature; writing an annotated bibliography; studying examples of medium or genre in museums; knowing insiders of the field; developing files of articles, newspaper clippings, reproductions, etc.; writing a glossary of technical terms; writing an outline of the proposed field research; asking for critiques by insiders and outsiders of the field; re-writing and revising the outlining of the field research.

> As artist-researchers their field research typically involves observation of artistic activity in its cultural setting, interviews with artists, participation in the activity if possible, recording of events on tape or film, taking notes during or following events, and so on, until they have the knowledge, skills, or critical judgments that advance the art in some way. [24]

As an "insider," in order to accomplish such a task of describing the large quantity of information that he collected since 1986 as part of his field research, Dernini kept records of it into a series of chronological notebooks, written as a field research diary, which was not a simple task, as Malinowski pointed out in his controversial A *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*.

> I also thought about problems of keeping a diary. How immensely difficult it is to formulate the endless variety of things in the current of a life. Keeping a diary as a problem of psychological analysis is: to isolate the essential elements, to classify them (from what point of view?), then, in describing them indicate more or less clearly what is their actual importance at the given moment, proportion; my subjective reaction, etc.[25]

First, Dernini examined all Plexus available sources. He used the procedures for historical researches described by Barzun and Graff in *The Modern Researcher*.[26] He organised various documents within a chronological categorical inventory. His need for

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[21] Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby, *Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology, p. 2*, 1982.

[22] Alfred Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, p. 66, 1970.

[23] David W. Ecker, "The Artist as Researcher: The Role of the Artist in Advancing Living Traditions in Art" , 1990.

[24] David W. Ecker, "The Possibility of a Multicultural Art Education", p. 15, 1986.

[25] Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, p. 247, 1989.

[26] Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher, p.* 165-166, 1985.

accuracy made him double-checking all sources, through verification procedures[27] such as the comparison of copies with sources, one of the fundamental ways of verifying complex facts, together with disentanglement, identification and clarification procedures, to verify the attribution of a name to a source.

Following these verification procedures, he identified and chronologically organised all records and relics of Plexus events from 1982 to the present. He also identified if they were consistently related to the study and if there was an underlying theme or themes, unifying them into a single non stop event. Various documents related to several different events were recognized as part of one single stream.

Dernini managed the methodological problem of interpreting "insider" accounts of Plexus participants by combining "emic" and "etic" procedures as pointed out in *Emics and Etics. The Insider/Outsider Debate*, in order to investigate the same data from two different points of view. "Emic" accounts, reported in Chapters III, IV and V, and Appendix A, were used by Dernini as primary sources for the development of his multicultural study.

> An emic unit, in my view, is a physical or mental system treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behavior and as the same emic unit in spite of etic variability.…Appropriateness of an emic unit includes the feature of its relevant occurrence in relation to the total cultural pattern of an individual or society (e.g., involving the purposes of a person in relation to the set of philosophical presuppositions shared with his or her culture). And such a patterned whole is itself a high-level emic unit (e.g., an emic world view, or the structure of an individual's activities and attitudes as related to a discipline such as anthropology).[28]

Dernini also followed the claim by Kenneth Pike that it was possible for an insider to apply both "emic" and "etic" procedures.

> I view the emic knowledge of a person's local culture somewhat as Polanyi views bicycle riding. A person knows how to act without necessarily knowing how to analyze his action. When I act, I act as an insider; but to know, in detail, how I act (e.g., the muscle movements), I must secure help from an outside disciplinary system. To *use* the emics of nonverbal (or verbal) behavior I must act like an insider; to *analyze* my own acts, I must look at (or listen to) material as an outsider. But just as the outsider can learn to act like an insider, so the insider can learn to analyze like an outsider.[29]

In dealing with the validity of Pike's claim, Marvin Harris disagreed on the feasibility of "insiders" becoming "outsiders" and of "outsiders" becoming "insiders."

> I have always stressed the feasibility, indeed the tactical necessity, of training participants to carry out etic observation. And like Pike, I regard the ability of the outsider to talk, think, and act like an insider (as judged by insider) to be a hallmark of an emic account. Perhaps what Pike is getting at is the distinction

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[27] Ibid., p. 109-144.

[28] Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, and Marvin Harris (eds.), *Emics and Etics. The Insider/Outsider Debate*, p. 28-29, 1990

[29] Ibid., p. 33-34.

between observers and participants as mutable categories. If so, I would disagree on the ground that observers constitute a scientific community whose status is not normally altered by learning how to talk, or act like the people they are studying. Normally, what happens is that they simply become better observers.[30]

Dernini employed also a "reflexive double mirror" attitude, as pointed out in *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology* by Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby, to try to gain the necessary detachment from the object of his study.

> Without the acute understanding, the detachment from the process in which one is engaged, reflexivity does not occur. Merely holding up a single mirror is not adequate to achieve this attitude. The mirrors must be doubled, creating the endless regress of possibilities, opening out into infinity, dissolving the clear boundaries of a "real world."[31]

Sandro Dernini was conscious of the fact that such a continuous inquiry on Plexus was interfering with the natural process of the Plexus art project under inquiry. Since the beginning of his inquiry, he kept a radical suspicion of the immediate validity of his methodological interpretative approach, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argued in *The Hermeneutics of Suspicion*.

> Our efforts at understanding can be seen from the point of view of the suspicion that our first approach - as a prescientific one - is not valid and that consequently we need the help of scientific methods to overcome our first impressions. [32]

Dernini as interpreter had his own historicity which pointed to a specific angle of interpretation, "an interpretative participation," as it was claimed by Gadamer, that was determined by a widespread and ongoing cultural processes of understanding, made by approximation and the overcoming of errors, in which the identity of the interpreter was always partly constitutive of this hermeneutical process of understanding.

> "Participation" is a strange word. Its dialectic consists of the fact that participation is not taking parts, but in a way taking the whole. Everybody who participates in something does not take something away, so that the others cannot have it. The opposite is true: by sharing, by our participating in the things in which we are participating, we enrich them; they do not become smaller, but larger. The whole life of tradition consists exactly in this enrichment so that life is our culture and our past: the whole inner store of our lives is always extending by participating.[33]

"No method can transcend the interpreter's own historicity," it was argued by Gadamer who stressed the ambiguity of the activity of "interpretation."
> We may well ask whether we can interpret such ambiguity except by revealing that ambiguity. This brings us right back to our question concerning the

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30 Ibid., p. 77.

31 Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby, *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*, p. 3, 1982.

32 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Hermeneutics of Suspicion*, p. 58, 1984.

33 Ibid., p. 64.

particular connection between composition and interpretation within the overall relationship between the activity of interpretation and the activity of artistic creation. Art demands interpretation because of its inexhaustible ambiguity. It cannot be satisfactorily translated in terms of conceptual knowledge.[34]

Gadamer further pointed out the endlessness of the hermeneutical undertaking in approaching the interpretation of a text.

> This first step of hermeneutic endeavor, especially the requirement of going back to the motivating questions when understanding statements, is not a particularly artificial procedure. On the contrary, it is our normal practice. If we have to answer a question and we cannot understand the question correctly (but we do know what the other wants to know), then we obviously have to understand better the sense of the question. And so we ask in return why someone would ask us that. Only when I have first understood the motivating meaning of the question can I even begin to look for an answer. It is not artificial in the least to reflect upon the presuppositions implicit in our questions. On the contrary, it is quite artificial to imagine that statements fall down from heaven and that they can be subjected to analytic labor without once bringing into consideration why they were stated and in what way they are responses to something. That is the first, basic, and infinitely far-reaching demand called for in any hermeneutical undertaking. Not only in philosophy or theology but in any research project, it is required that one elaborates an awareness of the hermeneutic situation.[35]

To deal with the delimitation of the field of his experience with the *Plexus Black Box*, Dernini followed first a series of phenomenological operational rules outlined by Don Ihde in *Experimental Phenomenology. An Introduction*.

> The first operational rule, then, is to attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear. A parallel rule, which makes attention more rigorous, may be stated in Wittgensteinian form: *Describe, don't explain....*[36]

Idhe pointed out as second rule the delimitation of the field of experience:

> What is important to note at this juncture is that one must carefully delimit the field of experience in such a way that the focus is upon describable experience as it shows itself.[37]

The third rule for Idhe was the *horizontalization* of all phenomena as "equally real' within the limits of their givenness."

> This procedure prevents one from deciding too quickly that some things are more real or fundamental than other things.[38]

Idhe, introducing the second level of a phenomenological investigation by looking for the essential features of the phenomena referred not just as particularities, pointed out the fourth hermeneutic rule as "seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena" and further describes "phenomenological reductions" as methodological devices to clear the field. "So far, I have been discussing *phenomenological reductions*,

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[34] Ibid., p. 69.

[35] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science,* p. 107, 1992.

[36] Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology. An Introduction*, p. 34, 1979.

[37] Ibid., p. 35-36.

[38] Ibid., p. 37.

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those methodological devices that clear the field and specify how it is to be approached."[39]

Following hermeneutical and phenomenological methodological procedures pointed out by Alfred Schutz in *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, Dernini shifted continuously the focus of his attention, from misunderstanding to understanding, from the idea of the whole to the perception of the parts of it, going back and forward from the margins of his pre-known kernel as an insider of the project, in order to overcome the doubt of the reliability of first impressions. Schutz referred to interpretative methodology as "the proper determination of what is interpretationally relevant with respect to a previously prevailing topic."[40]

As an "insider" already with his "stock of knowledge at hand" of Plexus *Black Box*, Dernini intentionally and continuously changed his way of looking at the sources.

> A stock of knowledge at hand….[It] is the sedimentation of various previous activities of our mind, and these are guided by systems of prevailing actually operative relevances of different kinds. These activities lead to the acquisition of habitual knowledge which is dormant, neutralized, but ready at any time to be reactivated.[41]

"The stock of knowledge at hand" of Sandro Dernini determined a system of interpretational, topical and motivational relevances, which had its roots in the sedimentation of various previous activities of his mind. His system of relevances prevailed at any particular autobiographical moment and set guides for actions by which his decisions on investigation were made, and which in turn determined the horizon of the thematic field of the research, bringing inside marginal material from the background.

> Motivational relevances lead to the constitution of the "interest" situation, which in turn determines the systems of topical relevances. The latter bring material which was horizonal or marginal into the thematic field, thus determining the problems for thought and action for further investigation, selected from the background which is, ultimately, the world which is beyond question and taken for granted. These topical relevances also determine the level or limits for such investigation required for producing knowledge and familiarity for the problem at hand. Thus, the system of interpretational relevances becomes established, and this leads to the determination of the typicality of our knowledge.[42]

Schutz pointed out that the distinction of these three systems of relevances, as three aspects of a single set of a phenomenon, was useful in the clarification of the constitutive process of understanding: through the system of topical relevances, in the clarification of the concept of value and of the freedom of the interpreter in choosing the values by which to be guided; through the system of interpretational relevances, in

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[39] Ibid., p. 41.
[40] Alfred Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance,* p. 129, 1970.
[41] Ibid., p. 66.
[42] Ibid., p. 66.

the clarification of the verification, invalidation, and falsification of propositions; through the system of motivational relevances, in the clarification of the intersubjective understanding and personality structure.

In order to *grasp as such the* living act of his experience, Dernini in the preparatory procedures, as a necessary condition to challenge his interpretational procedures, performed a series of artificial voluntary acts of reflection to explore intrinsic relevant structures, which create several "provinces of reality" within he experienced *Plexus Black Box*.

> Although experienced as a unity, what I am doing is not one single activity; it is rather a set of heterogeneous activities, each of them taking place in its own appropriate medium. This set of activities is itself structured into theme and horizon....It is the predominance of the theme which creates the apparent unification of this set of activities, and it bestows the main accent of reality upon the realm of theoretical contemplation....[43]

Following Schutz, as first step to identify what was thematic, Dernini selected in a serendipitous way one of the Plexus activities or provinces, in order to gain full attention, if only momentarily, to start his reflection.

> In truth we are always living and acting simultaneously in several of these provinces, and to select one can merely mean that we are making it so to speak our "home base," "our system of reference," our paramount reality in relation to which all others receive merely the accent of derived reality - namely, they become horizonal, ancillary, subordinate in relation to what is the prevailing theme.[44]

The "province" of Plexus 23s, the identity under which Dernini operated as an "insider" in Plexus, was selected by him as his first home base. It allowed him to assume a *"counterpointal structure,"* creating an *"artificial split"* in the unity of his personality, as it was claimed by Schutz.

> It is this "counterpointal structure" of our personality and therewith of our stream of consciousness which is the corollary of what has been called in other connections the *schizophrenic hypothesis of the ego - namely* the fact that in order to make something thematic and another thing horizonal we have to assume an artificial split of the unity of our personality. [45]

Dernini started his system of relevances from the structurization of his Plexus 23s "artificial" thematic center.

> In our mental activities we are directed exclusively toward the theme of the field of consciousness - that is, toward the problem we are concerned with, the object of our interest or attention, in short toward the topical relevances. Everything else is in the margin, the horizon, and especially all the habitual possessions we have called the stock of knowledge at hand. The motives for our actions are also in the margin of the field, whether the motives be of the in-order-to type (beyond

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[43] Ibid., p. 10.

[44] Ibid., p. 11.

[45] Ibid., p. 12.

or before the topically relevant theme) or the because type (which belongs essentially to our past and leads to the building up of the chain of in-order-to motives governing the determination of the theme or topic).[46]

"The actual interest" of Plexus 23s followed by Dernini, depending upon his own autobiographical and situational circumstances, created the borderline of the first segment of the *Plexus Black Box* placed under investigation.

Schutz pointed out that there were not isolated questions, each was interrelated with the other, and were interpretationally relevant those elements, implicit or hidden in the margin of the field, implicit in the inner and outer horizons of the topic, which in the ongoing process of reflection might become topically relevant of the thematic center or "kernel," made by the sedimentation of an experience which has its own history.

> It is also obvious that I may at any time turn to what is implicit or hidden in these horizons (to what is in the margin of the field) and bring such elements into the thematic kernel (i.e. make thematic what has been only operative or marginal). [47]

In order to change the conditions of observation it was necessary for Dernini to act in such a way that the decision of how to act was part of a chain of interrelated motivational relevances, as Schutz pointed out "what has to be done is motivated by that for which it is to be done, the latter being motivationally relevant for the former."

Dernini had to learn to examine more carefully *Plexus Black Box*, from inside and outside his own understanding, in order to shift his attention of focus in such a way "that data, which were at the margins, could be drawn into the thematic kernel." He had to "weigh" how new marginal materials produced in the course of his ongoing inside and outside operational process of understanding were interpretatively relevant, in order to determine the impact of circumstantial modifications in the thematic kernel. Dernini applied the system of relevances proposed by Schutz to deal with the problem of his interpretative decision as sedimentation of previous experiences.

Aware of his first artificial selection, performed at the beginning in selecting the kernel leading his methodological hermeneutical process and in order to gain more freedom from his "stock of knowledge at hand", Sandro Dernini created continuously different observational conditions of looking at new "insider" additional interpretatively relevant materials, until when he felt to have sufficiently clarified and solved the problem at hand.

> On the other hand, it is quite possible that a shift in the system of interpretational relevances - as with the introduction of a new concept - becomes the starting point for building up a set of new motivational or topical relevances which do not thus far pertain to the familiar stock of knowledge at hand.[48]

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[46] Ibid., p. 67.

[47] Ibid., p. 68.

[48] Ibid., p. 70.

Then, Dernini "looked" at collected "insider" accounts with a deconstructionist lens following Jacques Derrida's "bifurcated writing," described in *Margins of Philosophy,* by placing his interpretation at the margins of collected "insider" accounts, to overturn the hierarchical setting and looking by texts of Western philosophers, as it was claimed by Derrida "to deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment."[49] The placing at the texts' margins of interpretational notes was for Derrida an effective deconstructive move to deal with the multiplicity of meanings.

> Gnawing away at the border which would make this question into a particular case, they are to blur the line which separates a text from its controlled margin. They interrogate philosophy beyond its meaning, treating it not only as a discourse but as a determinate text inscribed in a general text, enclosed in the representation of its own margin. Which compels us not only to reckon with the entire logic of the margin, but also to take an entirely other reckoning: which is doubtless to recall that beyond the philosophical text there is not a blank, virgin, empty margin, but another text, a weave of differences of forces without any present center of reference.... and also to recall that the *written* text of philosophy (this time in its books) overflows and cracks its meaning.[50]

Then, the phenomenological procedure of the *"epoché,"* pointed out by Ecker, Johnson and Kaelin in *"Aesthetic Inquiry,"* was applied by Dernini as "a device for distinguishing relevant from irrelevant statements about the nature of the aesthetic object."

> American phenomenologists, in particular Kaelin, have interpreted Husserl's *epoché* as a technique for establishing relevance in statements of criticism. As Husserl developed the technique, practicing the "phenomenological epoché" entailed the suspension of what he called the "natural attitude." This latter term is used to refer to the life conditions of ordinary humans relating to the objects of their natural environment, interpreted either through the categories of common sense or of scientific explanation.[51]

For Ecker, Johnson and Kaelin, the epoché technique allowed the subject to suspend his natural attitude in describing an object and to attend merely to the qualities of the object in question as they appeared to one's conscious attention.

> Therefore, by "bracketing out" all the non-phenomenal characteristics of the appearances of the natural object such as its species, any of its supposed causes, or putative explanations associated with its existence, one is left with what John Dewey referred to as the "felt quality of the immediate"...The function of the *epoché* is to close off all irrelevancies that may occur to an appreciator as he attends to the qualitative base of the aesthetic expression before him. To practice the *epoché,* one is enjoined from referring to the properties of the object qua physical or to any other associations which his perception may invoke, but which are not controlled by the qualitative structure he perceives. [52]

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[49] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, p. 41, 1981.

[50] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. xxiii, 1982.

[51] David W. Ecker, Thomas J. Johnson and Eugene F. Kaelin, *"Aesthetic Inquiry"*, *Review of Educational Research* 39, p. 583-584, 1969.

[52] Ibid., 584.

Then, to deal with the problem of different levels of discourse in the project under study, Dernini applied the Ecker - Kaelin's Taxonomy[53] outlined in "The Limits of Aesthetics Inquiry: A Guide to Educational Research," as a model for relating responses to an artifact or an event that seemed to him proper to be used in his aesthetic inquiry of the *Plexus Black Box*.

This model encompassed 5 levels of inquiry and related activity:

1) Experiences with objects/events; art objects/events are perceived, performed, produced;

2) Criticism; aesthetic judgments are made and justified;

3) Aesthetic judgments are analysed and evaluated;

4) Theory; art and art criticism is explained;

5) Meta-theory; explanations are analysed and evaluated.

These procedures could be followed at two or more of five levels, from the bottom to the top or vice versa. In his inquiry, Dernini proceeded from *Plexus Black Box*, the event, to the top of the ladder. *Plexus Black Box* became the subject-matter on which the researcher grounded different, various and very often divergent inside accounts by Plexus participants. He looked at these experiences as starting points of his aesthetic inquiry identifying which invariant features were present in the various recollections of the experiences of the Plexus participants.

> ...it seems clear that the basic limit-found as that condition allowing communication between the various worlds of aesthetic experience-is to be located within the responses of these various subjects to a single aesthetic object. From this starting point we move to the second phase of our project, which is to show how, once a unique "object of criticism" has been isolated for aesthetic contemplation, the use of language to describe or evaluate the art work affects what can be known through aesthetic inquiry.[54]

At the end, Dernini grounded his multicultural interpretation upon a kind of "emic-etic" re-casting hermeneutic process, made by a deconstructionist "close reading" of "insider" understandings reported as "direct quotes" in Chapter V. By conceiving the dominant position of the interpreter as a culturally context-bound one, Dernini presented as equally relevant all "insider" understandings as significant components of his multicultural hermeneutical aesthetic inquiry.

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[53] David W. Ecker and Eugene F. Kaelin, "The Limits of Aesthetic Inquiry: A Guide to Educational Research", p. 258-286, 1972.
[54] Ibid., p. 266.